

Reconnecting

Customer Service to Your Brand Promise

Your brand is your company's promise to its valued customers. No matter what type of business you're in, delivering what you promise is the key to your success. Whether you offer a service or a product - how it's delivered to your customers every day is what differentiates you from your competition.

In these challenging economic times, with our focus on increasing (or maintaining) the bottom line, there appears to be less and less of an emphasis on the customer experience. This, in turn, leaves customers feeling cold and undervalued, and ultimately, will compromise your brand.

As the owner of Suasion Communications Group/Smith O'Keefe, a full-service communications agency, my staff and I execute marketing and public relations campaigns. Communicating brand messages through story placements, e-mails, websites, social media and advertising is what we do every day. We are charged with designing, communicating and managing a brand message through these various channels - but once the message has been communicated, it's up to each of our clients to make sure it is delivered properly at the point of customer encounter.

Take a minute to think about the elements in your business name, logo and experience - what do they symbolize and what are the customers' expectations when they do business with you? Every brand conjures up an image. Now more than ever, it's essential to reconnect to your customers and have an accurate understanding of where your brand image stands in their minds.

The Greater Wildwoods Tourism Improvement and Development Authority - the Destination Management Organization that oversees marketing and promotion of The Wildwoods, NJ and operates the Wildwoods Convention Center on behalf of the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority - offers two perspectives on customer service, from the meetings and conventions side and the vacation resort side.

The Wildwoods' state-of-the-art 260,000-square-foot convention center located directly on the beach and boardwalk is one of the Northeast's top locations for meetings, conventions, trade shows, concerts and events.

by Susan Adelizzi-Schmidt

"We emphasize customer service here every day by personally catering to our event and meeting planners' needs. It really comes down to agility and being flexible. Our clients know we'll go the extra mile to make their special requests a reality," said John Siciliano, executive director of the Greater Wildwoods Tourism, Improvement and Development Authority. "Our staff is on site and on the ball to exceed the meeting planners' expectations. That gives us a terrific competitive advantage."

As one of New Jersey's premier vacation resorts, with over nine million visitors annually, the Wildwoods vacation experience is all about families and creating unforgettable memories that will last a lifetime.

"Our award-winning, free beaches, action-packed boardwalk and distinctive variety of affordable accommodations (over 8,000 motel/hotel and bed & breakfast rooms) provide the foundation for a great vacation destination, but it's our people here that really make the difference. One of the Wildwoods' distinct advantages is the family-owned businesses here that cater to visiting families. Some of the businesses have had the same family owners for decades, and their warm hospitality is what keeps generations of families coming back, time and time again," explained Siciliano.

This is important, because basic customer service fundamentals such as smiling, making immediate eye contact and listening with a genuine concern to the customer's experience, sometimes may be overlooked.

I recently facilitated a customer service seminar at a Central Pennsylvania HSMAL meeting at Penn's Peak in Jim Thorpe. During the presentation, which was attended by representatives from many of the major Pocono Mountains resorts, we discussed how every service impression that the resorts make on each customer also impacts the overall destination brand.

To help the participants better visualize this, everyone was given a puzzle piece at the beginning of the session to place into a puzzle, which, together and in place formed a beautiful image from the

Poconos. Later in the session, we referenced the puzzle, in its completed state, to demonstrate how each resort makes a valuable impression and contribution to the overall image and brand. And that's the image visitors will walk away with - so everybody needs to make sure that their contributions result in a positive impression.

David M. Jackson, CMP, director of sales for the Pocono Mountains Convention and Visitors Bureau, hosted the event and summed it up very nicely: "Customer service begins the moment a potential client picks up the phone, logs onto your website or pulls into your driveway. Customer service becomes real when you master the art of turning a bad situation into a satisfied customer. It is then that the client knows you truly believe in what you say. In other words, you have made the client into a king or queen during the time that you have shared."

A brand promise includes delivering on the authentic, real and perceived characteristics of your business - the one-of-a-kind characteristics that make it distinctive. A brand promise communicated in a marketing and public relations message that is later delivered to clients and customers with courtesy and conviction ensures repeat business and will increase the bottom line.

The Chauncey Conference Center and Laurie House in Princeton, NJ takes customer service very seriously, according to Sara Blivaiss, general manager. "Exceeding guest expectations remains the tenet of our customer service philosophy. Every team member at Chauncey Conference Center participated in customer service training in September 2009. Every hotel and conference center in our competitive set has nice guest rooms and great meeting space. Exceptional guest service delivery is what makes Chauncey unique," she said.

Blivaiss said she and her team like to refine their strategy on a weekly basis. "A portion of our weekly staff meeting is spent critiquing our service delivery from the prior week. As general manager, I want to hear from the team about our performance and execution over the past week. How can we improve? What did we do right? What needs to be fixed?"

"Some are simple solutions, like making sure that the group that arrives late at night has the closest rooms to the elevators, limiting noise in the guest room corridors," she continued. "Another solution is making sure that the directions on our website (www.chauncey.com) are updated to include road construction projects in the area."

For those who feel that their customers might not be receiving the kind of exceptional service they should be - there is now help available. Jim Cohn, publisher of Mid-Atlantic Events Magazine, along with his partners, is launching a new initiative called Service Re-Design to address the growing need for customized customer service training from experts in the hospitality field.

Service Re-Design will host seminars on customer service for various hotels, conference centers, resorts, restaurants, banquet facilities, attractions, museums and theaters. These customized seminars will be offered in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Metropolitan New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, DC, and can run from four hours to two days.

"Customer service - it's not just a department, it's an attitude," noted Cohn, who has worked for over 25 years in the hospitality industry. "For those who are feeling stuck or overwhelmed, our Service Re-Design Seminars can help their company to refocus, realign and redesign its connection to their customers."

After all, he added, when a company consistently provides great customer service, their clients will not feel the need to look elsewhere. "In turn, they will become your best form of advertising."

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